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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000766

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STATE PASS TO USTR FOR JASON BUNTIN AND AARON ROSENBERG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2016

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POL, REGION, OFFICIALS
SUBJECT: COR PRESIDENT AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS CHAIRMAN DISCUSS
LEGISLATION

REF: MANAMA 549

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

¶11. (C) The Ambassador met separately with Council of Representatives (COR) President Al Dahrani and COR Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security Committee Chairman Ahmed Behzad on April 23 and 24 respectively to discuss pending legislation of U.S. interest. Both MPs expressed their confidence that FTA-related IPR amendments and separate anti-terrorism legislation would be passed during the current legislative session. Behzad said that legislation covering public gatherings had been sent from committee to the full parliament. Al Dahrani expressed his opposition to jail time for journalists, a contentious issue in the discussion of a new press law. Al Dahrani doubted the government would send the 2007-2008 budget to the parliament for approval before the current session ends in June ahead of parliamentary elections. He clarified earlier public remarks on including appointed members on municipal councils. End Summary.

Hopes for July 1 FTA Implementation

¶12. (C) During a meeting with the Ambassador April 23, Council of Representatives President Khalifa Bin Ahmed Al Dahrani expressed confidence that several pieces of legislation of interest to the USG will be passed by the end of the current legislative term, which is scheduled to run through mid-June. The Ambassador stressed that legislation amending Bahrain's intellectual property rights (IPR) regime must be approved expeditiously in order to implement the FTA on July 1. (Note: The COR received six IPR amendments as a package when, for the first time in Bahrain's four-year legislative history, fast-track authority was invoked. The amendments cleared the COR and are now moving to the upper house Shura Council. The amended copyright law and trademark treaty must still pass both councils. End note.) Al Dahrani included anti-money laundering legislation among those he anticipated that the COR would pass this legislative term.

¶13. (C) The following day, April 24, the Ambassador met with COR Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security Committee Chairman Ahmed Ibrahim Behzad. In addition to praising the passage of the IPR amendments, Behzad expressed concern that implementation of the FTA has been delayed. The country's oil production is declining, so Bahrain needs to focus more

on trade and investment opportunities, primarily for Gulf investors. Once other Gulf countries have their own FTAs, the incentive to invest in Bahrain diminishes. He said that Bahrain's continued success in democratic progress depends upon a strong and growing economy. He noted that recent street disturbances both distract the King from moving forward on democracy and discourage investors from considering Bahrain.

Optimism on Counterterrorism and Assembly Legislation

¶14. (C) Both parliamentarians expressed similar optimism on the passage of anti-terrorism legislation, estimating that it would pass by the end of May. When the Ambassador noted some controversy about the bill, Al Dahrani agreed there had been some "good dialogue" in the COR, and it was difficult to predict the final form of the legislation before parliamentary discussion was completed. Behzad confirmed that the title of the legislation had been changed in committee to "Protection of Society Security Law" to focus on protecting the people rather than fighting terrorism. He recognized that due to the law's controversy, the committee had to accommodate the concerns of some MPs, but he assured the Ambassador that the draft legislation criminalized conspiracy and planning, as well as committing terrorist acts, a hole in existing Bahraini law that needs to be plugged.

¶15. (C) Behzad said that another piece of legislation passed by his committee to the full parliament was a law on public gatherings. Previous draft legislation had drawn criticism from Shia MPs and others in the community, so it was reviewed

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by the government, amended, and re-sent to the committee. He said that the draft restricts gatherings from forming near commercial areas, hospitals, the airport, and roads leading to these areas. Although the right to protest is important, this right cannot infringe on another's right to access to these protest-free zones. The public needs to realize that one's freedom needs to be limited when it begins to affect another's freedom.

Press Law

¶16. (C) When asked about the press law under discussion in the COR, Al Dahrani said that it is important to get the law passed this term. (Note: An area of contentious discussion on this legislation is jail time for journalists who criticize the King or Islam, among other proposed restricted topics, in their reporting. End note.) Al Dahrani said that the jailing of journalists is not an effective solution, but that fines should be levied to make editors more accountable. Some reporters want to be heroes by writing sensational stories, but holding editors accountable will make reporting more responsible.

Pushing Through a Future Budget

¶17. (C) The Ambassador asked Chairman Al Dahrani about rumors that the Cabinet would deliver the 2007-2008 draft budget to the parliament for consideration during the current session. Al Dahrani said that he had heard the rumors through the press like everyone else, but he doubted there would be enough time for that to happen. (Note: The government may be thinking it will have difficulty getting the budget through a future, less friendly parliament, so it may attempt to get next year's budget approved before the end of the current legislative session. End note.) He recognized that many members of the current parliament were strong on finance and

budgeting and that a future COR may not have that same level of expertise. In the current COR, more than 25 percent of members have expertise in finance, enough to form two full Financial and Economic Committees, whereas the next COR will likely consist of more politically-minded members and may not have enough qualified members to fill even one Financial and Economic Committee.

Future of Municipal Councils

¶ 18. (C) The Ambassador asked Al Dahrani about a proposal he made in a recent interview advocating that municipal councils include appointed members in addition to elected members.

(Note: Currently the five municipal councils are composed of 10 elected members each. End note.) Al Dahrani acknowledged that elections were good, but that elections may not always bring the most qualified people into office. Elections in Bahrain are influenced by tribal and other loyalties, so it may be beneficial to consider Kuwait's municipal council model that includes elected and appointed members. The formation of Bahrain's municipal councils was conducted in haste; the councils may be too large for such a small country. Al Dahrani admitted that the municipal council experience is still new in Bahrain and in the future the councils may become more effective in delivering services at the local level.

Iran

¶ 19. (C) Behzad expressed his concern over the growing diplomatic conflict with Iran. "If Iran is attacked it will be dangerous, but if it is not attacked it will still be dangerous." He also commented on the political motives of a few MPs who are vocal in their support for Bahraini detainees at Guantanamo, saying that their support is really a reelection campaign tactic. Finally, Behzad said that four years of public service was enough and that he would not run for another term in the COR. He is looking forward to returning to his business, which has been managed primarily by family members since he became an MP in 2002.

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